

Definitions of Fake News in Library Guidelines: A Pilot Study

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Abstract. Fake news has drawn special attention in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election. Librarians have played a proactive role in combatting fake news in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, the term fake news is not well defined. This pilot study attempts to identify key characteristics of fake news by employing a content analysis of guidelines about fake news from 14 academic libraries. The findings show that the two elements of intention to mislead and falsity are explicitly present in the definitions of fake news in the guidelines. Other elements such as partisan bias, clickbait, and distorted context manifest in the definitions of only some guidelines. No guidelines present the element of the omission of important information in their definitions. This study suggests that guidelines must present their definitions of fake news so that they reflect the complexity of the current phenomenon.

Keywords: Fake News, Definitions, Academic Libraries.

1 Introduction

Fake news has drawn special attention in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election. The evidence shows that fake news has been widely circulated on social media during the election period [1]. Moreover, a survey shows that fake news headlines fooled the readers who saw them about 75% of the time [2]. While it is still unknown whether fake news was crucial in the outcome of the election, this evidence is concerning to academics and information professionals.

With respect to the phenomenon of fake news, the Library and Information Science (LIS) community has vigorously responded [3]. Librarians, in particular, have been vocal in advocating their roles in tackling fake news. Subsequently, they have played a proactive role in combatting fake news through a variety of ways including displays, guidelines, tutorials, workshops and credit-bearing courses [4-7].

Nevertheless, the literature shows that the term fake news is not well defined and recently used in elastic ways [8-9]. Generally, fake news is referred to news stories that are “intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” [1]. Recently Mourao and Robertson [8] argue that fake news is more than false information and deception, and they call for a new approach to fake news, combining elements of traditional news ideals with misinformation, partisan bias, and clickbait. Given the current debates regarding the meaning of fake news, it is useful to examine how the

term fake news is defined in library guidelines and what elements are manifested in the definitions.

This is a pilot study employing a content analysis. It explores the following research questions: RQ1. Do guidelines explicitly state the definition of fake news? RQ2. What constitutes the term fake news? More specifically, do the definitions of fake news in guidelines manifest the elements of 1) intention to mislead, 2) false information, 3) partisan bias, 4) misleading headlines or clickbait, 5) omitted information, and 6) decontextualized information?

The importance of this study lies in the following: The results suggest that guidelines would be more helpful to students with definitions that explicitly reflect the complexity of the phenomenon of fake news. Given the evidence that fake news stories commonly used a mixture of true and false information, clickbait, partisan bias and sensationalism instead of complete fabrications [8], it can be beneficial to students for librarians to provide them with a definition that specifies key characteristics of fake news in their guidelines.

2 Literature Review

Overall, this paper identifies the three lines of thoughts in defining the term fake news. First, a group of researchers sees fake news as the two elements of falsity and intention to deceive. Allcott and Gentzkow [1] define fake news as “intentionally and verifiably false” news. Some researchers pay attention to a spectrum of fake news. For instance, Wardle & Derakhshan [10] examine the term fake news as a continuum of information disorder based on the two elements of falsity and intention to harm. They prefer the terms, misinformation and disinformation to the term fake news. Then, they define fake news as a blend of the notions of misinformation and disinformation. Despite some variations of using the terms, this group of researchers characterizes fake news as the two elements of falsity and intention to deceive the audience.

Second, S   [11] does not use the actual term, “fake news.” Instead, she uses misinformation and disinformation. According to S   [11], accurate information can mislead people by using an implicature (meaning), or the omission of information. As a result, she stresses the notion of misleadingness as well as intentionality in distinguishing among information, misinformation, and disinformation. Here, she defines misinformation as “unintentionally misleading representational content” and disinformation as “intentionally (non-accidentally) misleading representational content.”

Third, Mourao & Robertson [8] define fake news as a discursive integration blending elements of traditional news, misinformation, sensationalism, partisan bias, and clickbait. Their study shows that complete fabrications were not common. Instead, fake news stories commonly used the mixture of traditional news, misinformation, sensationalism, partisan bias, and clickbait.

Based on the literature, this paper defines fake news as intentionally misleading news, which contains false information, with or without blending one or more ele-

ments of bias, the distortion of context, clickbait or distorted headlines, or the omission of important information.

3 Methods

3.1 Data Sources and Content Analysis

A content analysis of guidelines of 14 academic libraries was conducted to answer the above research questions. First, the analysis identifies whether each guideline explicitly states a definition of fake news of the guidelines. A few guidelines state the types of fake news offered by professor Melissa Zimdars at Merrimack College [12]. This study considers the types of fake news as definitions, as the types of fake news describe their definitions. Second, this paper identifies which elements of fake news manifest in their definition(s) in the guidelines, as compared the elements of the author's definition.

3.2 Sample

For this pilot study, three sources were used to identify guidelines about fake news from academic libraries in the North America. The sources include the lists from the ALA Public Programming Office [13], Eva and Shea [4], and Zook [14]. A total of 14 guidelines were analyzed in this study (See the Appendix for a list of the institutions)

4 Data Analysis and Results

4.1. RQ.1. Do Guidelines Explicitly State the Definition of Fake News?

A total 12 of (n=12, 85%) guidelines provide their definition of fake news.

4.2. RQ2. What Constitutes the Term Fake News?

Intention to Mislead. A combination of one or more following words or phrases were coded as the presence of an intention to mislead: Intentional, purposely, deceptive, "to generate likes, shares, and profits," influence, persuade, do harm, for political or monetary gains, motivation, deliberate, distorted actual news, disinformation, misleading, misinformation and manipulation. All guidelines that state a definition(s) of fake news (n=12) include words indicating intention to mislead in their definition(s). This shows that librarians consider intended misleading news a core element of fake news. However, a few guidelines treat misleading news stories as a distinct genre as well (e.g., libraries at the University of Virginia, University of Washington and Collyer College).

Falsity. The following words were coded as the presence of falsity: False information, misinformation, fabrication, falsifying reports, disinformation and lie. All

guidelines stating a definition(s) of fake news (n=12) include one or more words above in their definition(s). This indicates that there is a clear agreement on falsity as an element of fake news.

Partisan Bias. The following words stated in the guidelines were coded as the presence of partisan bias: Hold one ideological viewpoint, bias, and hyper-partisan. Only four library guidelines (30%) characterize partisan bias as an element of fake news (Colby-Sawyer College, Miami Dade College, University of Toronto, and Valencia College). Other libraries treat biased news as a separate category distinguishing from fake news. The results show that there is some inconsistency among librarians in dealing with biases regarding fake news.

Clickbait or Distorted Headlines. The words, clickbait, distorted headlines or mismatched headlines were coded as the presence of distorted headlines or clickbait in the definition of fake news. About 40% of the libraries (Indiana University, Miami Dade College, University of Virginia, University of Washington and Pace University) consider clickbait or misleading headlines as an element of fake news.

Omission of Information. No library specifies the omission of key information as an element of fake news in their definitions.

Distortion of Context. The words false context, distorted context, and decontextualized content were coded as the distortion of context or decontextualized content. Only four libraries (Indiana University, Miami Dade College, Pace University and University of Virginia) indicate that decontextualized information is a type of fake news by referring to the categories of fake news by professor Melissa Zimdars.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This content analysis shows that the majority of libraries (85%, n=12) provide a definition(s) or types of fake news in their guidelines. All of the guidelines present intention to mislead and falsity as key characteristics of fake news in their definitions. Regarding other elements of fake news, there are some variations among the guidelines. Concerning partisan bias, only a few library guidelines state bias as a characteristic of fake news in their definition. Less than half of the guidelines treat fake news and biased news as two distinct categories. Indeed, this perspective about bias is well aligned with the norms of traditional journalism that strive to balance, as opposed to bias. In addition, this inconsistent consideration about bias across the guidelines is an indication of no consensus of the term fake news among librarians. This reflects ongoing debates about the meaning of fake news in other disciplines, in which researchers have increasingly recognized that the phenomenon of fake news has become complicated [8][15].

Similarly, there were uneven considerations regarding the elements of distorted headlines or clickbait, and decontextualized content in defining fake news in the

guidelines. Overall, less than half of guidelines note these elements in their definitions of fake news. The results can be interpreted to mean that these elements are not considered as essential as the element of false information, but become a notable element in defining fake news. Finally, the omission of an important piece(s) of information is not considered as a key characteristic of fake news. Instead, the guidelines of the University of Virginia state this element as a characteristic of biased news (from which they distinguish fake news). Given the fact that the omission of information can easily mislead the audience, it needs further research regarding the omission of information as an element of fake news stories.

This study has certain limitations. First, this is a pilot study employing a convenience sampling method with only small sample size (n=14). The results cannot be generalized to other guidelines of academic libraries and should be interpreted with cautions. Second, identifying how librarians define fake news through definitions or types of fake news presented in guidelines shows only a piece of their understanding of fake news. Further empirical research is needed to examine as to whether and how the definitions are aligned with their methods of detecting fake news. Finally, further research is needed regarding how their understanding of fake news relates to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which is a core tool for their information literacy programs in academic libraries.

Appendix

A list of guidelines about fake news

University of California, Berkley Libraries
<http://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/fake-news>

Colby-Sawyer College Library
<http://library.colby-sawyer.edu/fakenews>

Harvard University Libraries
<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake>

Indiana University East Libraries
<http://iue.libguides.com/fakenews>

Miami Dade College Library
<http://libraryguides.mdc.edu/FakeNewsResource>

University of Michigan Libraries
<https://guides.lib.umich.edu/c.php?g=283063&p=4471741>

University of Oregon Libraries

<http://researchguides.uoregon.edu/c.php?g=612324&p=4251698>

Pace University Library
<https://libguides.pace.edu/fakenews>

Penn State University Libraries
<http://guides.libraries.psu.edu/fakenews>

University of Toronto Libraries
<https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/c.php?g=705826&p=5021873>

University of Virginia Libraries
<https://guides.lib.virginia.edu/c.php?g=600315&p=4156721>

University of Washington Libraries
<http://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/evaluate/fakenews>

University of Wisconsin-Madison – College Library
<https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=640444&p=4485002>

Valencia College Library
<http://libguides.valenciacollege.edu/c.php?g=612299&p=4251520>

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